THE SPIRIT OF PRECEDENT IN DECORATION, AND NOT THE LETTER, OUR GUIDE.

If we should go so far as some would have us, and admit that classic and mediæval forms and proportions must remain unchangeable, I think that the same rule will not hold good in decorative art; for as most of the classic and mediæval forms are necessitated by the constructional peculiarities, they are in some measure confined within the limits of mechanical laws, while, on the other hand, decoration is governed by the taste, the imagination, and sense of beauty and fitness, whose larger and freer sphere alone can put any limits upon it. Even among those who admit and practise new combinations and beauties in general arrangement and composition, and whose works show how much thought and patient care has been bestowed upon them, we find too often that their details have scarcely a feature that is at best more than an imitation of ancient work. The first pleasure experienced on contemplating a good building, where this heedlessness of detail (as a thing worthy of close attention) is manifested, will be found to be chilled, when we look closely into the design; for, with the general composition, the evidence of thought and design ceases, the hand becomes feeble, and is content to take up conventional forms, and to follow in the old dusty track, by a copyism that blindly follows what others have previously laboured to produce. In the impression that a building leaves on the memory of those who are able to appreciate the art that has produced it, and even on less educated minds, will be most frequently found the criterion of its real merit; and just in that degree that the designer's mind has been master of his whole work, will it be capable of conveying to others the poetry of his art.

The architect writes his mind on stone and wood; and whether it be mean or noble it is stamped there for present and future generations to read. How then will the work of that one be looked upon who is content to hand down the subterfuges and imitations of degenerate taste appended to his design? They are to his building what artificial flowers would be if grafted on a living stem: like these his ornament can only be beautiful because it imitates what is more beautiful, and it falls infinitely short of it, because wanting all true life. If, then, we continue to copy what at first was the artist's expression of what he saw in the natural forms around him, we not only lose the teaching of nature, but generally miss the artist's interpretation of it as well, and the work becomes our version of his genius.

The mediæval architects were remarkable for their heedlessness of precedent in this respect: their fixed laws were in construction and general design chiefly, and great latitude seems to have been allowed in the best ages of pointed architecture. We forget when we take these details on trust, that their chief beauty is in the efforts they show to follow nature with no intermediate teacher; and at that very point where they leave her for another their art begins its decline. We cannot look at the details of any of our cathedrals, or even of our smaller churches, where the stems of vine and ivy trail in the hollow mouldings, and the boss, like a bunch of flowers, grows from the arched roofs, where the garlands mantle the capitals of the pillars with their foliage, and faces gaze from walls and arches, and not feel that the workman did not go to the buildings he had seen for his ornament, neither did he count the cost of his work and try to put up something that would cost least time, thought, and money. His was a labour of devotion, a sacrifice willingly rendered back to Him who gave the power to conceive it. His models he gathered from the green earth or the living creature in the imaginings of his mind and the histories of Scripture or the emblematic legends of saints. All are types of some thought, even of evil passions and hatreds as much as of devotion and praise, for among the numerous grotesque figures are many that speak plainly enough contempt and irony, and rivalry the most bitter; and some of the faces are the very impersonations of wickedness. Instead of scoffing at the rudeness of these, it would be better for us if we were to strive to follow their earnestness; for, manifold as their defects are, few can so forcibly embody an expression or a meaning, and too many now work without having any meaning to embody, but are satisfied with the so-called correctness of their style. The very foliage often seems to be typical. In the oak and thorn and ivy leaves are the emblems of the thick forests that grew round the monks' dwelling-places in their first simplicity, and the beasts and birds that inhabited them have their place in his decoration. Birds and flowers, from their gayer colours, are especial favourites in the illuminations of manuscripts. There are many faces, also, that are self-evident portraits in these, as well as in the paintings, carvings, and stained glass.

It is scarcely possible for the art of architectural decoration to expand till we free ourselves from the love of copyism, and take up in its stead the animating *spirit* of the past. With our added knowledge and increased means, to what might we not attain if we only trusted ourselves to this spirit. Let antiquarian knowledge be no longer the guide, but rather the suggester, and we shall eventually attain, what it now perplexes so many heads even to imagine,—a new style. Have we not our own history and our own faith to symbolize that we need to cling to those of the past, that are often but barely comprehensible? Are there not more lands and more wonders known to us, from which we may collect our models, than our forefathers had? Why do we even pass by familiar objects to copy their representations of them? Why content ourselves by putting up griffins or dragons, or other fabulous creatures, when the whole of animated nature offers its graceful forms to us, and the simplest weed that grows is a more beautiful and perfect thing than ever was chiseled by man's labour or coloured by his art; and not the earth's surface only, but from its hidden places, we might learn, and turn its crystals and fossils to our use. The sea also offers its beauties to our eyes, in the forms of its shells, its fuci, and corals,—things seldom used in decoration, but certainly most appropriate for sea-side buildings, and those which are used for what appertains more especially to naval purposes. We who live in a new age must not confine ourselves only to that which our fathers knew and practised. Whatever they saw spread out for them is yet more widely spread for us; but instead of turning back and copying their works, let us seek, with the same spirit that they possessed, in that same book in which they sought, and *found*, that which, though old as the creation, is to us ever the newest and fairest. E. W. L. C.

PLEDGE-DEPOTS FOR THE WORKING CLASSES.

The early advocacy of lodging-houses by The Builder was not without effect in popularising the theme. The extensive clearances made in densely inhabited poor quarters, and the extrusion of hundreds of families from squalid, ill-ventilated, undrained courts and lanes, absolutely required the substitution of other locations: for swarming poverty must have sought shelter in remoter purlieus, where they would cling and cluster in closer and fouler community, or else have emigrated to the county towns or agricultural districts.

It is certain that in the gradual improvement of the metropolis, in keeping pace with the growing taste for embellishment, houses of such a character as might suit the labouring classes have not been built; and equally so that the only chance which now remains for making provision for the operatives is dependent on the construction of suitable lodging-houses at convenient intervals. A porter or even an inferior shopman of New Oxford-street, or of the style-reforming centres, cannot find lodgings at a distance under one mile and a half and frequently three miles from his occupation; and although the higher grade of clerks are receding as far as possible from the centre (some of them by rail) still the relinquished tenements hardly suffice to supply the accruing wants of those who succeed them. For single men, lodging houses on the model plan may do; but how is the workman with a family of four to six in number to be lived? this latter wants three rooms at 4s. a week, clean, whole-some and convenient; but these he cannot get, nor even two rooms fit for human habitation at that price. Twenty shillings may be considered (allowing for lost time, sickness, &c.) the average wages of the sons of toil, and in this year of free trade, that sum will go further than 30s. would have gone ten years ago; yet how can the father of a family see his little ones pine for food or raiment (which they must inevitably do), if he exceed that sum for lodging.

It is not so much thought of as the subject needs, that a clean commodious apartment not only conduces to the health of a family group, but that the facilities it affords economises time and materially promotes morality. The common saloon *at home*, with a *fire*, often keeps the hard-wrought mechanic from the gin parlour! What is wanted is the *Family Lodging-house*, with fitments suitable to the advanced state of a fearfully increased and much improved community. That march of science which refines the tastes, whilst it increases the requirements of the higher orders, goes on progressively, and the modes of life which were tolerated last century by the humblest citizen, would now be loathed as unsuited to the circumstance and wealth of this nation, as well as to the era in which we live.

The public baths are certainly a great convenience and luxury to the poor, but the wash-houses, to be convenient, should be *attached to their dwellings*: the mother of an infant family cannot, nor can the sick or weakly roomkeeper, go out to wash.

All the requirements of our social state are now better understood than formerly, because they are more studied. The accumulation of living souls within the focus of London presses upon the fiscal powers for increased provision against general want: the public health, as also the public peace, demand it: the laws of nature, as well as the law of God, inforce it.

There is, however, one vast requirement, to which little attention has been paid in this country—one which our neighbours, the French, have long acknowledged and acted on: but as yet, in this metropolis, no attempt has been made to realise a resort for the people, which has been blessed abroad with the happiest results to millions. As this is a foundation fixed on the first of Christian virtues, and as it is embodied in structures, The Builder may not be a bad medium of a design which has for its corner-stone the Christian basis of charity: this *is a Mont de Piété*—a great national pawnbroker's warehouse, not at thirty per cent. and tickets and pence, and too often at other extortions, but simply at five per cent. per annum.

Such a per centage (calculated to a month) would be quite sufficient, not only to pay a suitable return for capital invested (such as four per cent.), but would amply requite the numerous hands employed in superintendence and management. In such an establishment not only would a fair equivalent be given for the value of the article pawned, but an *additional extent of time* might be allowed for the redemption of the deposit: for, unhappily, the bequest of paternity, the valued gift, the not-to-be-replaced relique of friendship or love is but too often fortetted, and for ever lost, under the present grinding system of heartless exaction.

I do not say that pawnbrokers are worse than other men, but their vocation makes them callous, and their profits are on the distresses of the needy, for the confiscation of the pledge is the greatest gain to the lender.

Did the rich know this, they would feel for it, but as a body they cannot know it: it is only through the press, and by the narrative of those who "know the short and simple annals of the poor" *they* ever can know it.

There is as much charity as wealth in our happy land: every corner we turn announces it. See St. George's Hospital fronting *two parks!* But look everywhere, on all sides, it is there! How many institutions founded and supported by voluntary contributions,—

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